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ZNY SSSSS ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9270
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAE/AMEMBASSY ASMARA PRIORITY 2299
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFIA/CJTF HOA PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0108

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000482

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF, AF/E, IO, AND INR/GGI
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA-WATCHER
CJTF-HOA FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/25/2018

TAGS: PREL MOPS PBTS PHSA

SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI-ERITREA: U.S. OFFICERS VISIT RAS DOUMEIRA

REF: A. DJIBOUTI 472

1B. DJIBOUTI 449 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: DCM ERIC WONG. REASON: 1.4 (A), (B) AND (D).

11. (S) SUMMARY. A May 27 visit to the disputed Djibouti-Eritrea border at Ras Doumeira found opposing troops only meters apart in some areas. Eritrean forces are reportedly armed with RPGs and heavy machine guns, and are continuing to construct fortifications on Ras Doumeira. Approximately 20 Eritrean troops have deserted or defected to the Djiboutian side of the border, prompting Eritrea to demand their return and to threaten to detain Djiboutian soldiers if the defectors are not returned. The military situation appears to be static, with neither side willing to back away from the ridgeline. Djiboutian forces along the border appear to have been deployed there since April without rotation. On the diplomatic front, France is still awaiting word from Asmara to send an envoy. Post continues to recommend strong public statements in international fora in support of Djibouti and its claims that Eritrea has violated its territorial sovereignty. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) USLO-Djibouti Chief accompanied two staff directors from the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) on a site visit of the disputed Djibouti-Eritrea border at Ras Doumeira on May 27, from 0830-1100 local time. The USLO Chief was invited to attend by MAJ Youssef Abdullah, the Djiboutian liaison officer to CJTF-HOA. The party traveled via Djibouti Air Force fixed-wing aircraft to Moulhoule (the site of the Djibouti Army command post), received a briefing, and then proceeded by ground to the border site, approximately 15K to the north. All U.S. military personnel were in civilian clothes.

ERITREANS ARMED WITH RPGS AND HEAVY MACHINE GUNS

13. (S) The Djiboutian military's command post is normally a Djiboutian National Police border and immigration checkpoint, but the military has assumed complete control of the facility. The local Djiboutian commander, COL Ali Soubaneh, and his deputy, LTC Mohamed Robleh (a U.S. Army War College graduate), briefed the party on the general situation. They noted that the Djiboutian and Eritrean commanders communicated with each other, and that while there was some tension, there had been no open hostility or violence. They reported that the Eritreans possessed both rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers and heavy machine guns. LTC Robleh said he believed that Eritrea possessed, and had the

capability to lay, landmines, although he admitted he had not seen any emplaced. (COMMENT: U.S. officers saw no/no evidence to corroborate this unconfirmed assertion relating to landmines. END COMMENT.)

ERITREANS DEMAND RETURN OF DEFECTING TROOPS

14. (S) MAJ Youssef informed USLO Chief that several Eritrean soldiers had deserted or defected to the Djiboutian side. Based on earlier reports and information from Djiboutian officers at the border, the current total is estimated at 15-20. Reportedly, most left their weapons behind, and some have crossed by swimming along the coast. They have been debriefed by the Djiboutians and are being held in Obock. An earlier report indicated that they would be turned over to the UNHCR (ref A), but there is no indication so far that this has occurred. Eritrean officers have approached the Djiboutians and demanded that the soldiers be returned, threatening to attempt to snatch Djiboutian soldiers if they are not. (COMMENT: The issue of deserters/defectors could provide a scenario leading to an escalation to violence. END COMMENT.)

ERITREAN AND DJIBOUTIAN TROOPS ONLY METERS APART

15. (S) Conditions along the Ras Doumeira ridgeline on the mainland are austere. The Eritreans occupy the east and west

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sections of the ridgeline, as well as the valley to the north, while the Djiboutians occupy the center of the ridgeline to the south. As reported in open sources, in many cases the forces are separated by no more than a few meters. In one case, the party, including the Djiboutian commander, walked down a road leaving Eritrean soldiers between the party and the main Djiboutian force. Food and water are in short supply on both sides. There were several small boats along the northern coast, reportedly providing limited supplies to the Eritrean troops. The Djiboutians have offered food to the Eritreans, and it is usually accepted.

16. (S) Both sides have established dug-in fighting positions, without overhead cover, save burlap to ward off the sun. There is a built-up trenchline on the east portion of the ridge that the Eritreans had been building when the Djiboutians arrived. It is supported by stone masonry and appears to be designed as a military defensive position. Djiboutian forces are positioned at its end. Cursory inspection of Djiboutian weapons showed a hodgepodge of different small arms in varying condition. One medium machine gun was in excellent condition, but many individual weapons showed wear and little maintenance. Several U.S.-provided Humvees were present.

DJIBOUTIAN TROOPS, DEPLOYED SINCE APRIL, NOT ROTATED

17. (C) Separately, French Ambassador to Djibouti, Dominique Decherf, noted that Djiboutian troops at the border with Eritrea, at either Ras Doumeira or Doumeira Island, had not received their monthly wages in April or May. As Djiboutian troops were usually paid in cash, and then disbursed their wages to family members, troops deployed at the border had not been able to collect their wages. Decherf acknowledged that this indicated that Djiboutian troops at the border with Eritrea were not being rotated. Decherf said a French envoy was still prepared to come to the region to facilitate discussions between Eritrea and Djibouti, but was waiting for approval from Asmara.

18. (S) COMMENT: The military situation at Ras Doumeira

appears largely static, with neither side willing to back off the ridgeline. As reported earlier (ref A), the Eritrean military presence has also extended to Doumeira Island, claimed by Djibouti as wholly Djiboutian territory. The most likely scenario for an escalation to violence may be tensions related to the issue of Eritrean deserters and defectors fleeing to Djibouti. Another potential flashpoint is the continued construction by Eritrean troops of fortifications on Ras Doumeira, using heavy machinery (such as bulldozers). Neither side is well-supplied, but both seem committed to maintaining their positions. Post strongly urges public statements in international fora in support of Djibouti, and in support of seeking a peaceful resolution to reverse Eritrea's militarization of the Bab-al-Mandeb strait. END

COMMENT.

SYMINGTON